

”Democracy is being taken away in Michigan”

## As Detroit teachers head to court, politicians plot further attacks

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On Monday morning, 23 Detroit Public School (DPS) teachers will appear at the Michigan Court of Claims for a “show cause” hearing related to the mass sickouts that have called the nation’s attention to the deplorable conditions in Detroit schools.

The DPS issued a statement on Sunday saying it “looked forward to the opportunity to inform the court of the serious effects that these continued sick-outs are having,” urging the court to issue an injunction against the sickouts.

The hypocrisy of the DPS emergency manager Darnell Earley—who in his prior position was responsible for the mass poisoning of Flint’s children—accusing teachers of hurting their students is staggering.

The complaint was filed by the district last Wednesday. On Thursday the court denied the DPS’s motion for a temporary restraining order. However, all parties were ordered to appear on Monday for deliberation on the preliminary injunction.

The courageous stand by rank and file teachers, in the face of opposition from union leaders, the media and both Democratic and Republican politicians, has won massive public support. Workers and young people across the country are outraged at the degraded conditions Detroit schoolchildren face and have solidarized themselves with the teachers’ demands for decent pay and working conditions. Students told the media they planned to rally on Monday in defense of the teachers and against the injunction.

In response, state and local politicians—enraged that teachers dared to speak up about intolerable conditions—have launched a vindictive multi-pronged legal counteroffensive. The request for an injunction, issued by Democrat EM Earley, was followed Thursday by a series of punitive legislative bills proposed by state Republicans in the Michigan Senate.

The three bills would further attack the democratic rights of teachers in several ways. They would require expedited hearings by the Michigan Employment Relations Commission (MERC) on public employee strikes, grant MERC broad powers to fine striking workers, and would require the State Superintendent to suspend or revoke teaching certificates of anyone found to have participated in an illegal strike. Further,

an additional bill would punish any school district that failed to deduct MERC-imposed fines from teachers’ paychecks.

Among the senators sponsoring these draconian bills designed to criminalize the teachers’ fight is Geoff Hansen (R-Hart) who is also the lead sponsor on the two bills pending in the legislature to dissolve the DPS and create a new Detroit Community School district.

Throughout the escalating protests, union leaders, including AFT President Randi Weingarten; politicians, all the way up to the Obama administration; and the media have all combined to attempt to quash the determination of teachers.

On a parallel track, politicians of both big business political parties are intent on pushing through a reorganization of the district. The district has said its ballooning debts will cause it to run out of money in April. The aim of the reorganization is to clear the way for a huge growth of charter schools and other edubusinesses, and further attacks on pensions and educators’ incomes.

Indicative of the whole thrust of his plans for Detroit schools and his general assault on public education, Governor Snyder—the architect of the pending reorganization—has proclaimed January 24-30 “School Choice Week.”

In fact, big business interests in the media have now escalated the drumbeat for the complete dissolution of the Detroit Public Schools and the charterization of the district. On Friday, *The Wall Street Journal* published a called for “radical reform” modeled on New Orleans, “which converted nearly all of its schools to charters after Hurricane Katrina.” These comments were followed by a column on Saturday by Tim Kelly, Michigan state representative, in the *Detroit Free Press* calling for aggressive reforms “like Education Savings Accounts and vouchers” or the “expansion of choice and public charter schools to absorb the students of the former DPS.”

It is becoming very clear that the issue at stake in the current struggle is the fate of public education.

Teachers spoke to the WSWs about the significance of their struggle, the legal attacks and why they are determined to fight. “This injunction is meant to intimidate,” stated a Cass Technical High School teacher. “It’s a scare tactic. Divide and

conquer.

“The DFT used to be strong. When I grew up there were strikes all the time. My mom worked at DPS. We loved that they were fighting. But [former president] Keith Johnson actually signed our contract allowing 60 students in a class. That classroom didn’t get bigger. Gym classes sometimes do have 60 or more. How is that legal?.”

“It’s not just the governor. There are a lot people behind closed doors mismanaging funds, the Treasurer, the legislators. They want to shut down the DPS and just have Teach for America types that lack experience, experimentally playing school with our kids. My pay with a Masters degree has gone down 10 percent plus higher insurance deductibles. We loaned the district almost \$9,000 that you only receive upon retirement or separation from the district. They aren’t making it attractive to stay. They want us to quit to break up the union.

“Teachers are mad about the money. Where is it? I am wondering, are we the last people with pensions left?”

“It’s scary what’s happening all over—Chicago, Detroit—it’s a new world order. In 10 years they may have privatized education. They are changing society, period.”

Another longtime teacher said, “The State of Michigan is threatening to take our teaching certificates away—for us asserting our first amendment rights! Both of my parents were teachers and this is disgusting to me. Democracy is being taken away in the State of Michigan. Rick Snyder is denying 250 years of American history.”

“I saw Rick Snyder’s spiel—‘Go back, you’re hurting the kids.’ *He’s* hurting the kids and has done so for years and years. We’ve had enough,” said another veteran educator with DPS. “The injunction cherry-picked teachers, any names they could get. Many were not significant players. These people are just trying to carry on and teach. It’s a lot of stress to put them under—demanding they attend a hearing on Monday. It is just wrong.

“I am disheartened that teachers are so disrespected. I have worked for 29 years with the Detroit Public Schools. I feel dedicated; I had chances to leave, but I’m invested in this. It’s a calling. As they say, ‘I’m not in it for the income, I’m in it for the outcome.’”

“I’m an art teacher. For 15-20 years I went in and painted classrooms, the library, bathrooms. I believe we must create an inviting space. I need to create an environment where my children feel valued. Each year I have 500-700 children, over the years this is some 15,000-18,000 children. I’ve seen the conditions they have had to go to school in.

“People can’t buy cars, homes and food for their families. All of us are working poor. We see parents come in every day, struggling to raise their children. Both mom and dad are working two jobs.

“We have nothing to lose. I have three kids in college. They didn’t tell me I’d never get another raise, that I’d have an \$18,000 pay cut. We promised our children we’d help them,

like our parents did. But we are denied that ability because the governor rides roughshod over us. We mortgage our houses to get masters’ degrees and get pay cuts.

“Pensions are gone. New teachers get defined benefits. No one goes into teaching. We are treated like the dregs of society. Who wants to get a job starting at \$35,000 a year with \$100,000 in student loan debt?”

“They have no right to tell us what to do with our personal days,” said another teacher, referring to the threatened injunction against sickouts. “We were tired of rolling over. “The district took 10 percent in TIP [Termination Incentive Pay] and the state took three percent for the health trust, that’s \$2,500-\$3,500 each, plus interest. Rick Snyder took this and held it in escrow. Other state workers have gotten it back, but we’re on our third appeal to get it back! It’s unconstitutional.

“Why didn’t the DFT ask for them to release these funds? The DFT has shut down democracy in our union. We lost confidence in them.

“They have the workers all segregated—if you’re a blue collar worker, you should make so much—or a white collar worker, this much. We need to fight more and be more angry. We need to fight for all working conditions, for an increase in incomes. No one’s income has gone up—where has all the money gone? It is an oligarchy.

“I went to Flint and marched for three hours in the cold. That’s [the poisoning of the city’s water supply] the same business. It’s a basic civil right. Apparently the Michigan commission said water wasn’t a ‘civil right.’ Lies! If water isn’t a civil right, what is?”

“All the urban school districts should go out together—Philadelphia, Chicago—that would turn the nation on its head. One day. The system is not working for the majority of us. They just don’t want to pay for public schools anymore.”



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